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HOW WE CAN SPEAK TO NATURE: INSIGHTS FROM DIALOGICAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE BIBLE

Abstract. In our age of ecological crisis, religious traditions have been viewed as co-
-responsible for our ecological problem, in particular Christianity. This paper utilizes dia-
logical philosophy to suggest how Christianity can also be viewed as part of the solution.
The paper starts by presenting the dialogical speech thinking of Ferdinand Ebner, Martin
Buber and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, discussing their ideas about grammar, names and
the power of language to create a relationship between speaker and hearer. Next, the paper
goes on to show how according to these thinkers, nature is limited in its relational capabi-
lities. Nonetheless, this paper then argues that the resources of dialogical philosophy can
fruitfully be applied in renewing our human relations with nature, exploring what it can mean
to speak to nature. Biblical passages are used to illustrate these ideas and to show that
this dialogical approach to nature can be seen as consonant with the Christian tradition.

Keywords: Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy; Martin Buber; Ferdinand Ebner; nature; Christianity;
dialogue; language; speech

1. Introduction. 2. Language, speech and the word. 3. Relations to nature according to Buber,
Ebner and Rosenstock-Huessy. 3.1. Martin Buber. 3.2. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy. 3.3. Ferdinand
Ebner. 4. Saying "You" to nature: dialogical possibilities. 5. Conclusions.

1. INTRODUCTION

When considering our current ecological crisis, Lynn White (1967)
has been one of the earliest proponents of the idea that the Western
view of nature embodied in the combination of science, technology
and religion is responsible for it. On the one hand, theoretical science
combined with practical technology have given human beings unprec-
edented power over nature. On the other hand, Christianity replaced
older animistic religions and placed the divine outside of nature rather
than within nature. As a consequence, with nature no longer being

divine or sacred, the technological exploitation of nature for human ends became possible and permitted.

In many religious traditions, we can identify ecologically problematic aspects as well as resources that may help us toward a more ecological way of life. White himself already pointed to ecology-friendly countercurrents in the Christian tradition, exemplified by figures like Saint Francis of Assisi. The aim of the present essay is to help in the endeavor to "green" religions, i.e., to uncover ecological ways of thinking, talking and acting within existing religious traditions, Christianity more specifically.[1] This is done by utilizing the help of dialogical philosophy as an approach to nature that we can see exemplified in certain passages in the Bible.

I use the term "dialogical philosophy" here to designate a group of three Christian and Jewish thinkers who focused on speech-thinking and dialogue and who all published their major works in the 1920s: Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy (1888-1973, *Practical Knowledge of the Soul*), Martin Buber (1878-1965, *I and Thou*) and Ferdinand Ebner (1882--1931, *The Word and the Spiritual Realities*). While these thinkers focused on human speech and dialogue, their thinking can also be used to explore the possibilities for dialogue between humans and nature. My central claim in this paper is that dialogical philosophy can help us (re)discover that/how we can speak to and with nature.

In the first section of this paper, I will explain some of the central ideas of Ebner, Rosenstock-Huessy and Buber about language and speech: the way that grammar encodes social relations, the distinction between the word and a conceptual term, the importance of the second person as opposed to the third person, names, and the idea that language is a spiritual phenomenon. In the second section, I will look at what these dialogical philosophers had to say about nature: their conception of what constitutes nature, the difference between

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1 See Taylor (2010) for a general reference and Conradie (2006) for an overview of ecological thinking with respect to Christianity.

humans, animals and plants, our ability to relate to and speak to nature, and the question of whether nature itself can speak. In the third section, I apply all of these ideas in working out what it can mean for us to speak to nature, to say "You" to nature. I present examples of this you-saying from both the Old and the New Testament, and I conclude that if we take dialogical philosophy seriously, a dialogical relation with nature is possible, even if it turns out to be different from the dialogical relations we have with human beings.

2. LANGUAGE, SPEECH AND THE WORD

Language is an important theme within dialogical philosophy. My aim is not to highlight the ideas of any particular philosopher or the details of how dialogical philosophers differ from each other. Instead, my brief exposition will focus on the general approach to language that is shared by them and also on those ideas that may be fruitful when we want to think about our relationship with nature.

Rosenstock-Huessy (1963, 440) sees grammar as the Baedeker of social relations, i.e., language encodes the different relations we can enter into with respect to each other and the world around us. For him, the tense of a verb conjugation encodes our being in time, whereas the noun declension allows us to designate different positions in space (Rosenstock-Huessy, 2012, 66). It is important that we become aware of the different forms of relationality encoded in grammar and be able to make use of them to explore the full range of our human potential as relational beings. According to Rosenstock-Huessy, we should not focus (as science does) on declarative sentences, the indicative mood of the verb and the nominative case of the noun. The narrow focus on sentences like "It is raining" by philosophers of language has led to a misunderstanding about what is most fundamental about language and a neglect of the full range of relational possibilities captured by grammar and language (Rosenstock-Huessy, 1963, 35-85).

Many of the insights obtained within dialogical philosophy derive from seeing language as speech, i.e., from seeing language as something that is spoken. We speak to each other, we address each other using language. In the speech thinking of dialogical philosophy, speaking to someone is more fundamental than speaking about someone. For this reason, Rosenstock-Huessy sees the vocative case of the noun and the imperative mood of the verb as more basic and more important than the nominative case and the indicative mood. A word is not in the first instance a conceptual term (*Begriff*) for describing and analyzing reality, but a means to open communicative relationships.

Spoken words are something that takes place in the space between hearer and speaker. Buber (2003, 127) calls this the sphere of the Between,[2] Rosenstock-Huessy (1963, 342) writes about mouth and ear as one system. But speaker and hearer have often been neglected in philosophical thinking about language which has focused too much on propositional content. For this reason, it is the second grammatical person (you) and its associated relationality that for Buber and Ebner is more fundamental than the third person (he/she/it). For Ebner (1963, 645-646), the word is a vehicle of the relationship between the *I* and the *you*, it both creates and presupposes this relationship. Similarly, Rosenstock-Huessy (1963, 343) approvingly refers to Heraclitus as seeing the logos as the unity of hearer and speaker that is above their separate existence as hearer and speaker.

The notion of truth receives a dialogical reading when Ebner (1963, 121-122) states that the meaning and truth of a word that is spoken consists of it not missing the *You*. This truth cannot be captured (*begreifen*), but we can be captured by it (*ergreifen*; Ebner, 1963, 702). When the *You* is missed, we end up with I-loneliness (*Icheinsamkeit*), an I that is enclosed within itself. For Ebner (1963, 669 and 998), all evil is created in the closing off of the *I* before the *You*.

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2 Ebner (1963, 652) has a similar view.

The aim of speaking, of using language when addressing the other, is not information but transformation (not *begreifen*, but *ergreifen*). Already the first biblical use of langue in Genesis (Let there be light!) demonstrates the transformative power of language through a divine speech act. More generally, Rosenstock-Huessy sees language use as something that is intended to change both speaker and hearer: When addressing somebody through an imperative or a vocative, the aim is to change the hearer by getting their attention or initiating a communicative relationship with the hearer. The aim of speaking is to change the listener into a being that did not exist before they were addressed (Rosenstock-Huessy, 2012, 134). It is not just the hearer who is changed, however. In his example of wishing someone well for their birthday Rosenstock-Huessy (2012, 57) suggests that the sincerity of such a wish can be measured by the effect that the speech act has on the speaker.

The reason that speaking can not only change the hearer but also the speaker is that within dialogical philosophy, the word (*Wort*) is not the same as the conceptual term (*Begriff*). Words are not seen as precisely delineated conceptual terms, but rather as underdetermined living spiritual vehicles which unfold their meaning and their effect as they are uttered. When the word is turned into a conceptual term, it is made abstract, the fullness of its original meaning is narrowed and reduced, it becomes fixed into an inflexible dead sign (Ebner, 1963, 651 and 706). Ebner calls the word the *objective* existence of the relational reality that connects the I and the You. The *subjective* existence of this relational reality is love (Ebner, 1963, 153 and 196).

Names are a class of words which is of great importance within dialogical philosophy and which can illustrate the ideas just presented. Rosenstock-Huessy (1950, 58) sees names as ways to ensure us of the reality of that which cannot be put into conceptual terms. God is the primary example of such a reality which we can name but not conceptualize. However, the same holds for every human being. We can use a name to speak to someone as well as to speak about

someone. While other philosophies of language focus on speaking about, seeing names as rigid designators (Kripke), dialogical philosophers focus on speaking to, seeing names as "creative addressors." The name I choose to address you by expresses something about my relationship with you, and it may also help to establish a particular kind of relationship. Rosenstock-Huessy points also to another aspect of names: they can be inspired, connecting the bearer of the name to a certain spiritual reality. This is most obvious with names that have a particular meaning, like Michael (Who is God?) and Aimée (Beloved). Names also connect us to other bearers of the same name, those that have gone before us. Names can thus function as a secret and a promise, possibly intended by those who gave us the name, but always open as something that needs to unfold itself and become a living reality in our lives (Rosenstock-Huessy, 2012, 173-174; 1981, 34-37). In a similar vein, Ebner (1963, 693 and 694) sees names as determining things and persons in their being and the giving of a name as something that conveys meaning.

The view of language and speech presented within dialogical philosophy does not look at speech as a natural phenomenon. Rosenstock-Huessy (1963, 360-361; 1964, 812-813) is clear in rejecting the idea that language and speech (*Sprache*) is part of nature. Rather, they are a spiritual phenomenon, having a spiritual origin (Ebner, 1963, 85-86). This is why Ebner refers to his philosophy as *pneumatology*, dealing with the spirit of the word. What makes speech spiritual is that it occurs in the Between, between I and You (Ebner, 1963, 86). It relates us to each other as well as to the divine, which according to Buber (2019, 82) is where the extended lines of relations intersect. The word is the key to spiritual life (Ebner, 1963, 125), it is of divine origin (Ebner, 1963, 126). For Rosenstock-Huessy (1963, 360), Christianity has taken the Logos out of nature and returned it to God. In this sense, we can see the thinking of Ebner and other dialogical thinkers as a philosophical elaboration of the opening verse

of the gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (New King James Version).

3. RELATIONS TO NATURE ACCORDING TO BUBER, EBNER AND ROSENSTOCK-HUESSY

The aim of this essay is to see whether the speech thinking of dialogical philosophy as outlined in the previous section offers us possibilities for exploring new relationships to nature. As it turns out, Buber, Ebner and Rosenstock-Huessy have already written about what our relation to nature, plants and animals can be. This section will provide a brief overview of their views.

3.1. MARTIN BUBER

While some authors have linked Martin Buber to experiences of nature (Tallmadge, 1981; Friskics, 2001; Salwa, 2020), nature does not play an important role in Buber's work and he did not develop an explicit philosophy of nature. Nonetheless, there are two ways in which nature plays a role in his work. Firstly, there are a number of encounters with non-human nature which Buber describes phenomenologically: there is an encounter with a horse when he was 11 years old (Buber, 1962, 196-197), his reflections on meeting the eyes of an animal, in particular a cat (Buber, 1962, 143-145), general reflections on encountering a tree (Buber, 1962, 81-82) and a specific lime-tree (Buber, 1962, 432-433). Secondly and more generally, Buber specifically mentions the realm of nature as one of the three realms where an *I-Thou* as well as an *I-It* relationship can occur. It is to the description of these two types of relationships that I shall now turn.

Buber sees the human self not as a substance but as a relation (Levinas, 1967, 136-137). The human self is never just an isolated *I* but exists in one of two possible kinds of relations or attitudes (Buber uses

the term *Haltung*), that is either as an *I–Thou* or as an *I–It*. *I–It* stands for the traditional subject-object relation of epistemology (Friedman, 1954, 268). The object is seen as separate from the knowing subject, and the subject experiences the world outside of itself. *I–It* can come to know things about the objects that make up the world, and the properties these objects have. On the other hand, *I–Thou* does not experience but meet the world, it knows the world instead of knowing *about* the world. This knowledge takes place in the moment of meeting: *I–Thou* knowledge is present in the sense that it occurs in the present moment and it is also due to its being present to the current moment and what occurs in it. It is immediate in the sense that it is not mediated by concepts, previous knowledge or the imagination (*unmittelbar*; Buber, 1962, 85). By contrast, Buber associates *I–It* knowledge with the past, as it deals with a world that has already been carved up into entities and concepts. This is precisely why *I–It* knowledge is communicable and ordered in space and time.

Buber considers these two different relations to exist in three different spheres of human existence: nature, the human sphere and the sphere of intelligible forms. In the sphere of nature, he describes on the one hand how we can experience a tree in an *I–It* relation where we are interested in its properties, what the tree looks like, how it lives and how it is built, as an example of a particular sort of tree. On the other hand, within an *I–Thou* relation we encounter the tree as a whole. We do not have to forget our knowledge about the tree, but rather this knowledge is an indistinguishable part of the encounter with the tree. We encounter the tree itself (Buber, 1962, 81-82). Buber thus explicitly allows for *I–Thou* relationships with non-human nature, plants and animals in particular. At the same time, Buber never specified minimal conditions that have to be met for non-human nature to be able to enter into such an *I–Thou* relationship. In his later postscript to *I and Thou*, Buber remarks that we can also experience reciprocity in our interaction with a plant, even if the plant cannot (re)act. Buber calls this a reciprocity of being,

a living wholeness which the plant can manifest to the person who is fully present (Buber, 1962, 161-163). On the other hand, Buber sees that *I–Thou* relationships between humans and non-human nature are not (yet) capable of full reciprocity. These relationships are in that sense lacking. As reciprocity is for Buber the key to personhood, this more limited form of *I–Thou* relationship with non-human nature is related to the question of whether animals and plants should be seen as persons. Buber considers the ontic borders of personhood uncertain and difficult to draw for us (Buber, 1973, 469-470).

3.2. EUGEN ROSENSTOCK-HUESSY

Rosenstock-Huessy's work contains many passages where he talks about the notion of nature. Voorsluis (1988, 130-163) distinguishes three senses in which Rosenstock-Huessy uses the term: as *physis*, as what is studied by sciences such as physics, and as referring to the essence of something. I will only focus on the first sense in which Rosenstock-Huessy uses the term, and I will follow the exposition in Voorsluis (1988, 131-133).

The Greek term *physis* lies at the origin of the Latin term *natura*, which is the etymological and conceptual root of our term "nature." Rosenstock-Huessy interprets this term as living reality and living growth. Physis includes plants and animals. Rosenstock-Huessy suggests that it also includes our social reality. He also saw the Greeks as making a distinction between the speaking and the silent world. The later distinction between culture and nature is here prefigured in the distinction between the ordered speaking world of the polis and the silent chaotic world of physis. Leaving aside the question of the correctness of Rosenstock-Huessy's analysis of Greek thought, he was critical of the dualism he perceived in it. At the same time, Rosenstock-Huessy appreciated that the Greek conception of nature saw nature as a living reality, as opposed to the dead nature he saw as the subject of the natural sciences. While it is difficult to make out

Rosenstock-Huessy's precise views and evaluation of Greek think-
ing, it is clear that in his work he often refers to the idea of nature as
the silent part of the universe (Rosenstock-Huessy, 1963, 43; 1964,
226; 1981, 3).

Rosenstock-Huessy does not deny that animals have some form
of speech as well. In his work, he makes a distinction between three
different types of speech: pre-formal, formal and informal (Rosen-
stock-Huessy, 2012, 133-134). According to Rosenstock-Huessy,
children use the third type of speech, but as adult human beings,
they also learn to use the second type of speech. Animals, by con-
trast, use only the first type of speech. It does not have grammatical
forms and hence the relational capabilities of human speech, that
is speech of the second type. Names are for Rosenstock-Huessy
the highest form of this type of speech, and he sees these as absent
from animal speech. The second type of speech aims at the transfor-
mation of the hearer, something that animals do not aim at according
to Rosenstock-Huessy. This brings us back to his view that language
(of the second type) is not a natural phenomenon, as it is supposed
to relate us to the other and to the divine.

While for Rosenstock-Huessy animals, plants and other entities
in nature do not have the ability to address us the way humans can,
he does recognize that we can address them. Doing this, Rosen-
stock-Huessy argues, requires making a conceptual shift from na-
ture to creature. Viewed as creatures, we can address salt and water,
bread and wine as *You* (Rosenstock-Huessy, 1963, 489-490). Rosen-
stock-Huessy (2012, 123-125) quotes a particular rite for the blessing
of salt and water, where these are addressed as You. Addressing
them in this way, water and salt are pulled out of the natural into
the spiritual realm. They are then viewed not as entities that are sim-
ply given, but as given by someone, and therefore as still connected
to the spiritual reality of life to which they point.

3.3. FERDINAND EBNER

Ebner's views on nature turn out to be quite similar to those of Rosen-stock-Huessy. Like Rosenstock-Huessy, Ebner sees nature as the silent part of the world: Nature, mere nature, is where the word does not reach, and spirit is where it does reach (Ebner, 1963, 677). Ebner (1963, 914-915) identifies a developmental gap between plants and animals and between animals and human beings. For him, the gap between plants and animals is constituted by consciousness that animals have but plants do not. But where animals have consciousness (*Bewusstsein*), they do not have conscious being (*Bewusst–Sein*; Ebner, 1963, 105-106 and 168-169). Ebner links consciousness to the mute *I* that does not have self-consciousness. Conscious being, by contrast, involves self-consciousness as well as having the word, speech in its spiritual dimension. Humanity consists in having the word, and this is what distinguishes human beings from animals (Ebner 1963, 648). Having the word means realizing consciousness in the other, that the other can be addressed through the word. Speech presupposes the addressability of the other individual.[3]

In one of his diary entries, Ebner also presents another approach to the difference between plants and animals on the one hand and human beings on the other. All that exists, Ebner says, exists on a spiritual basis (*auf einem geistigen Grunde).* But for plants and animals, this spiritual basis lies outside of their existence, whereas for human beings this spiritual basis lies within themselves, as the spirituality of their existence.[4] This may be another way of saying that as human beings, we have the capability of addressing others as a *You*, while for Ebner, plants and animals can only be addressed as a *You*.

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3 See: Tagebuch, 31 Juli, 1917 (Ferdinand Ebner, *Gesammelte Werke*. Online Edition. http://wfe.sbg.ac.at).

4 See: Tagebuch, 7 Oktober, 1918 (Ferdinand Ebner, *Gesammelte Werke*. Online Edition. http://wfe.sbg.ac.at).

A third approach to the difference between animals and humans Ebner takes is to differentiate between understanding (*Vernunft*) and reason (*Verstand*). Ebner (1963, 154) conceptualizes understanding as the ability to hear and take in, he calls it the sense for the word, the possibility to be addressed by the word and its sense. Only human beings have understanding, according to Ebner, but both humans and animals have reason. Where understanding is the uniquely human faculty dealing with the word in its spiritual dimension, reason is the faculty shared by humans and animals that deals with words (*Wörter*, not *Worte*) as dead conventional signs (Ebner, 1963, 158).

4. SAYING "YOU" TO NATURE: DIALOGICAL POSSIBILITIES

If we look at the writings of our dialogical philosophers on nature (animals and plants), we can see that part of it has been superseded by more recent science. Research on animal cognition has shown that animals have more cognitive capacities than we thought, and that they have emotions and social structures similar to those of human beings (Wasserman, Zentall, 2012). Consequently, the gap between humans and animals that, for instance, Ebner refers to has become ever more difficult to identify for many researchers. When it comes to animal language and communication, we now know that nature is all but mute: many animal species possess complex systems of communication involving sounds, gestures and scents that we are just beginning to understand (Meijer, 2020).

Still, as human beings we cannot use language to communicate with nature in the same way that we do with human beings. While nature is not mute, it is often still mute *to us* because we do not understand what it tells us. For now, at least. Technological advances like artificial intelligence have already enabled us to find out ever more about animal communication, whale language being one example (Mustill, 2022). Scientists have already had "the first intentional

human-whale interaction in humpback whale 'language'."[5] Perhaps in the future, much of what dialogical philosophy had to say about dialogue between human beings will become applicable also to human-animal dialogues. The aim of this essay, however, is to show that even if this will not happen, dialogical philosophy provides us with possibilities for talking to nature in a more restricted form, thereby also changing our relations to nature.

To begin with, even in silence, without language, dialogue is possible. For Buber (1962, 175-176), there is a communicative silence (*mitteilendes Schweigen*) that does not involve any sounds nor gestures. It involves unreservedness (*Rückhaltlosigkeit*) between those involved in which case even without words, the word of dialogue can happen sacramentally. One might find an extreme example of what Buber has in mind in Marina Abramovic's performance where she spent three months sitting in silence across from visitors of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Akers, 2012).

Moving from silence to the use of language, Rosenstock-Huessy's claim that grammar encodes different forms of relationality, draws our attention to the different ways nature is linked to us via language. We speak about nature as an *It* more often than we speak to nature as a *You*. It is this addressing of nature as a *You* that is opened up by dialogical philosophy as a possibility. Maybe surprisingly, the Bible can provide us with examples that fit well into this dialogical way of thinking. We cannot enter into the exegetical and theological discussions that may surround such passages, but only use them to illustrate some of the ideas presented earlier.

In the New Testament, there are a number of occasions where Jesus directly addresses entities in nature. During a storm that arises while Jesus and his disciples cross a lake, Jesus "arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace, be still!' And the wind ceased

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5 See: https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20240409-the-scientists-learning-to-speak-
   -whale [accessed 26/02/2025].

and there was a great calm" (Mk 4:39, NKJV). And when on another occasion Jesus searches a fig tree for fruit but fails to find any, he says "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again" (Mk 11:14, NKJV). In the Greek original of the first passage, the verb expressing "to be silent/still" occurs in the second person singular of the imperative mood, expressing a direct address of the wind. In the second passage, Jesus addresses the fig tree explicitly as a *You* with the second form of the personal pronoun in the phrase "from you." Note that while the second passage suggests that Jesus's use of *You* extends to plants, the first passage suggests that it extends even further, to all of creation. In line with Rosenstock-Huessy, addressing the wind as *You* pulls the wind out of the realm of dead matter into the spiritual realm of creatures, created by God and answerable to the son of God.

In the Old Testament, we can similarly find the direct address of nature. In the psalms, the writer asks creation to praise God, e.g., "Praise Him, sun and moon; Praise Him, all you stars of light!" (Ps 148:3, NKJV), using the plural of the imperative mood in the Hebrew original. A similar and longer passage can be found in the book of Daniel: "All you winds, bless the Lord… Fire and heat, bless the Lord… Cold and chill, bless the Lord… Dew and rain, bless the Lord… Frost and chill, bless the Lord… Nights and days, bless the Lord… Light and darkness, bless the Lord… Lightnings and clouds, bless the Lord…" (Dn 3:65ff, New American Bible).[6] As in the previous passage, the second person of the imperative mood is also used here, in this case in the Greek original.

If we look at the *I-You* relationality at play in these examples, we can wonder whether the relationship to the fig tree, the wind or the other natural entities of creation is presupposed as given or whether it is (partly) created through these speech acts. Similarly, we

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6 Note that this passage is not accepted as canonical by all Christian denominations. It does, however, figure very prominently in the Roman Catholic tradition, where it forms a central part of the liturgy of the hours.

can ask whether these speech acts aim to affect the speaker, the hearer or both. Dialogical philosophy would suggest the latter. On the one hand, by addressing nature as a you, the speaker changes because of the new *I–You* relationality that is created, evoked or strengthened. The speaker becomes connected to nature through the address. On the other hand, at least some hearers can also be affected. While we may not be sure whether plants respond to human talk, animals clearly respond to being addressed as a *You*. And while it may not be clear what the writers of the Old Testament texts thought about the receptiveness of the moon, the clouds, nights and days to the invitation to praise God, the New Testament writers suggest that nature was receptive at least to the address of Jesus. For Ebner (1963, 677-678), Jesus is an exception in the sense that while for us human beings nature is where the word does not reach, the word of Jesus does have the power to reach and affect nature as well.

Turning to the role of names in our relationships with nature, the Old Testament describes the way that the animals received their names by the first human being: "Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name" (Gen 2:19, NKJV). The name of the animals is thus determined by what Adam called them. The central verb here is "call," and just like the underlying Hebrew word it can refer to both calling someone something and calling out to someone. Here we can see the dialogical distinction between speaking about and speaking to. The NKJV translation, like most other translations, renders the event as an act of calling someone something, as indicated by the "what(ever)." Buber and Rosenzweig, however, in their German translation of the Hebrew Bible, chose to translate the relevant phrase as *how he would call out to them* (*wie er ihnen rufe*). The choice is then between *what* and *how*, where the latter option is more open to a dialogical reading, where Adam calls out to the animals and thereby names them.

We can assume that the Biblical story about the naming of the animals is about how the animals received their common names, e.g., how the ox came to be called "ox," the dove "dove," etc. On the Buber-Rosenzweig reading, these common names may have originated from an original speech act of calling out to the animals using these names. They are given names, names given by Adam. By contrast, for us, the names of animals and plants often do not connect us to them in a meaningful or personally significant way. Yoon (2009) has described the history of the different ways in which we have named and classified nature. One of her central claims is that while folk taxonomies show many similarities across different cultures (Yoon, 2009, 144-145 and 288-289), the scientific classification of nature has removed us ever more from these folk taxonomies based on how we experience our environment (Yoon uses the originally German term *Umwelt* as a central notion, p. 15). This points to the more general idea that as science progresses, it will increasingly loose its connection to our lived experience.[7] In order to re-establish our relationship with nature we may do well to think about names which relate us to the entities of nature we name and how we experience them and connect to them.

If we take dialogical philosophy seriously in its distinction between the word as an open spiritual vehicle and the closed determined conceptual term, we might conclude that the dialogue between humans and nature may actually be more in line with dialogical thinking than the dialogue between humans and other humans. Human dialogue usually involves a propositional content, the information that is exchanged. Much of our theorizing about language deals precisely with the informational content that is exchanged. By contrast, as described above dialogical philosophy does not focus on this informational content, but on the space of the between that connects speaker and

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7 Feyerabend (1993, 70-73) made a similar point with respect to Galileo and the development of Copernican astronomy.

hearer, on address and relationship. Human communication with nature will often involve less informational content when compared to interhuman communication. We may ask the stars to praise God, ask the wind to be silent, talk lovingly to our pets or bless the salt. But the information actually exchanged in these communicative acts will often not approach the complexity of what can be involved in human communication and can never exceed it, simply because we do not share the same biology nor the same language. Hence, the relational aspect of communication, the address, by establishing a connection, is much more central and visible in human-nature communication than in interhuman communication. Put differently, the meaning of the word addressed to plants, animals and creation is even more open than the word addressed to a human hearer who shares my language. Buber may have seen this as a shortfall in human-nature dialogues. But we can also see it as an advantage, an opportunity for that which is essential in any dialogue to come out even more clearly.

5. CONCLUSIONS

How to address our ecological crisis and the deterioration of nature? Even the increasing occurrence of natural disasters like floodings, storms and forest fires do not seem to suffice for many people to incite them to action. One of the reasons for this may have to do with the fact that in contrast to other problems like war, homelessness and poverty, there seems to be no *You* that confronts us in nature. If there is some truth to this analysis, it may be worthwhile to explore ways of speaking and relating to nature as a *You*. This is what the dialogical philosophy of Buber, Rosenstock-Huessy and Ebner allows us to do, and we saw how certain Biblical texts can support us in this dialogical approach.

While the dialogical thinkers themselves were hesitant about our ability to enter into a full *I-You* relationality with nature, we saw that Ebner's idea about the deep gap between us and animals and plants

was too pessimistic. As Buber already pointed out, we humans can share a relational Between with nature as well. This relational Between is brought about by speech, by the word that is open in what it means and what it does between speaker and hearer. Human-animal and even more so human-plant communication is in this sense even more underdetermined than interhuman communication, because it is not clear what and how much information is actually exchanged in these dialogues with nature. Still, we can address nature with the human word, as exemplified in the Biblical passages mentioned. And what animals direct at us (sounds, glances, odors, etc.) may not be communication with propositional content that we can identify, but it is often addressed to us as a *You*. And if the truth of an utterance lies in its not missing the *You*, as Ebner says, then animals also have the truth of the word.

Buber already pointed to the fact that our dialogues and our I-You relations with nature are different from those with other human beings. We can make further distinctions between different kinds of animals, between animals and plants, and between plants and non-living creatures like wind, salt and water within nature itself. There is no need to label these different *I–You* relationalities as better or worse. It may be more useful to simply see them as different forms that *I–You* relationalities can take. In any case, it goes to show that the reach of the word is actually wider than even some of the dialogical philosophers may have thought. As illustrated in Biblical texts, we can say *You* to nature, and what this means and why it is essential is something that dialogical philosophy can help us understand.

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